



Written Testimony of
APSE
For the
U.S. House of Representatives
Subcommittee on Social Security
Hearing on
“Work Incentives in Social Security Disability Programs”
September 23, 2011

Chairman Thompson, Chairman Davis and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony for the hearing “Work Incentives in the Social Security Program.”

APSE is a national non-profit membership organization, founded in 1988 as the Association for Persons in Supported Employment, now known as APSE. APSE is the *only* national organization with an *exclusive focus* on integrated employment and career advancement opportunities for individuals with disabilities. APSE has chapters in 35 states and the District of Columbia. Our members come from all 50 states and Puerto Rico, as well as several foreign countries.

The evidence is extremely clear: people with intellectual and developmental disabilities can successfully work in the community. For over 20 years, the Institute for Community Inclusion has tracked employment outcomes for individuals served by state developmental disability agencies. According to the most recently available data, 20.3% of individuals are served in integrated employment – i.e., jobs in the community. After peaking at 25% in 2001, this figure has remained flat since 2004. This is unacceptable, particularly as you look more closely at this data and see the massive variation among states. Washington State leads the nation at 88%, with Oklahoma at 60%. Vermont, Maryland, Louisiana, New Hampshire, and New Mexico are also states that are well above the national average.¹ This is a highly diverse group of states, which have proven quite clearly that we can do a lot better than a 20% rate of individuals working in the community.

One of the key challenges for many individuals with disabilities is concern over loss of their public benefits if they go to work. The myths and misunderstanding regarding benefits among individuals, families, and service system staff are widespread. For example, many individuals say they cannot go to work because of loss of concerns over Medicaid. Yet under the Social Security Work Incentive 1619(b), individuals can earn up to a threshold amount without impacting their Medicaid coverage. This threshold level ranges from \$26,000 in Mississippi to over \$50,000 in Alaska. (source: Social Security Administration). The availability of individuals to buy Medicaid coverage on a sliding scale through the Medicaid buy-in program now available

in 44 states, is allowing individuals to maintain this necessary medical coverage at levels beyond the threshold level.

According to DRRK Disability Research, Medicaid buy-in enrollees earn more money, work more hours, contribute more in taxes, and rely less on food stamps than people with disabilities who are not enrolled.ⁱⁱ Individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities must be made much more clearly aware of these and other work incentives that will allow them to succeed in jobs and careers in the community. Studies have shown that the availability of comprehensive benefits counseling positively impacts the ability and willingness of individuals to go to work.
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The success of employment of individuals with disabilities also requires a comprehensive approach in terms of addressing all the various aspects of operating a service system to ensure that the vision of community employment is supported. This includes ongoing staff development, with both systems staff and service providers, so that they not only embrace community employment, but also have the technical knowledge to implement it. It also requires addressing a wide range of issues, not the least of which is benefits planning and use of Social Security work incentives. It also requires service monitoring, quality assurance, engagement of individuals and families, transportation, inter-agency collaboration with public vocational rehabilitation and strong transition services from school to work, also with with a clear focus on community employment.

The Work Incentive Planning and Assistance Programs funded by the Social Security Administration have been a good starting point in assuring that individuals have accurate information regarding benefits information. More needs to be done in ensuring that individuals and families are aware of the availability of WIPA services, that WIPA services consistently provide a message that encourages employment in the community rather than simply preservation of benefits, and that WIPA services are provided in a way that is fully accessible to individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Consideration also should be given to encouraging use of Medicaid Waiver funds for supporting benefits counseling services that supplement and expand those available via the WIPA programs.

The Social Security work incentives programs combined with use of incentives in the Medicaid program and other systems reform mentioned above can go a long way in ensuring that people with disabilities can truly live the American dream of equal opportunity promised by the Americans with Disabilities Act and become tax-paying, productive members of society.

ⁱ Butterworth, J., Hall, A., Smith, F. Migliore, A., Winsor, J., Timmons, J., Domin, D. (2011). StateData: The National Report on Employment Services and Outcomes. Boston: Institute for Community Inclusion, University of Massachusetts

ⁱⁱ Gavin, B., McCoy-Roth, M. (2010). Review of studies regarding the Medicaid Buy In Program. Boston: BU Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation

ⁱⁱⁱ Gruman, C., Shugrue, N., Kellett, K., Robison, J., Porter, A. (2010). The Impact of Benefits Counseling and Vocational Rehabilitation on Earnings. Farmington, CT: University of Connecticut Health Center

^{iv} Delin, B., Hartman, E., Sell, C. (2010). Does Work Incentive Benefits Counseling Improve Employment Outcomes for Those with Serious Disabilities?. Stout, WI: University of Wisconsin